

On Short Lead Times... Choosing Venues for Cocktail Receptions... And Lessons Learned From Mistakes

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We are hearing that many companies have been delaying their decisions to hold meetings and events. When planners finally get the go-ahead, they have to act quickly. Can you share a few of your strategies for dealing with short lead times?

Mariella: This is happening more and more often. Generally, I have an inkling that an event may happen, but I'm waiting for a final go-ahead. Usually, clients are not just coming to me two weeks ahead saying they want an event. They're coming six months ahead of time, but saying we *think* we're going to do this event but we're not quite sure. So I give all of my vendors a heads up to let them know something may be coming down the pike. I get all my ducks in a row without investing too much time, trying to make as many arrangements as I can, while waiting for the final go-ahead, so that once we get the approval, we can move things along quickly.

With invitations, we'll be going with email invitations as opposed to hard copies, because there's not time for a hard copy.

As for booking the venue, I give them a heads up, asking them to pencil me in, and then I ask them to let me know if

someone else wants the space, so I can talk with my client and tell them we need to make a decision because we might lose this space. If everyone knows what we're up against, people are generally willing to work with us.

Placide: This is a timely question—I just got a call to plan a social event in three weeks; in the past I'd have 8 to 16 weeks. I really think it's critically important to have basic operational procedures in place in order to successfully pull together events at the last minute, and my training as a CSEP has really helped me establish that groundwork. In preparing for that certification I learned about the different areas of event managing—administration, coordination, marketing and risk management—and how important it is to keep track of all the details by developing organizational charts and formulating budgets, negotiating contracts properly, dealing with waivers and permits, being in compliance with unions, music regulations, etc. Having these operational procedures in place from the start makes it easier for me to jump in, work with a client, and bring all of the elements together to pull off an event on short notice. It's also important to have a basic timeline, formulate a production schedule for the day of the event, and have a contact list.

As long as you have all of these basic documents in the computer, ready to go, you can just type in all the specifications related to the client and fill in your information as you work your way through.

Also important when doing events on short notice is to communicate to the clients that they need to approve details like venue selection, artwork, catering menus, etc. quickly. Clients need to understand that they have to get their deposit checks in quickly too. I invoice a client right away, and say, "I'm going to ask you for 70-80% of the budget right now, so I can immediately deposit that." Do a wire transfer rather than sending a check, to make it faster to process deposits to vendors including caterers, printers and graphic artists for save the dates, posters, whatever collateral is needed for the event.

Stergiou: That describes a lot of companies right now, and I'm actually in a similar situation myself. What I like to do on an ongoing basis so I'm better prepared to plan an event on short notice is to invest time in advance to stay on top of the new venues in the area, so I have a list of possibilities ready to go. I get the floor diagrams, some details on the space, and



keep them on my computer, so they are in my arsenal when I need them. I do a walk through, contact the event director and keep a detailed spreadsheet with all my research, so that when the trigger is finally pulled, I can hit the ground running. I've also found lately, that there's a good chance that when an event finally does get approved, it will be on a much smaller scale than the client previously envisioned. So, I also plan for a scaled-back version of the original event and look at sites that are a little less expensive or farther away, so I have a backup plan.

breaker. If they can't work with me, I won't be able to work with my client.

Placide: In choosing a site for a cocktail reception a major plus for me is if the venue has preferred caterers and if I can meet with those caterers and hold a tasting with the client. Having menus for me to look at with price points per person based on group size is a positive too—menus that are broken out in terms of, say, 50-75 people, 75-100 people, 150-200 people. The more details I have and the faster I can come in

and do a tasting with a client for food and beverage, the better.

Another positive for choosing a venue for a cocktail reception would be transitional spaces. Can I create different environments within one large space, so I can create a lounge area and block off or drape off areas for dancing or specialty entertainments, or do special things with lighting or food stations?

In a hotel, for example, can I take a whole floor and create connecting

spaces to create different looks and moods for a large reception? Same thing for an open space—can I bring in my own pillars, walls and drapings to create my own design and floor plan?

Negatives can be issues with loading in. If it's an older space where the load-in elevator is small, narrow, old or slow, it's a drawback. If the load-in is difficult and arduous for the production company or the vendors, it can increase the costs. For example, if the contract stipulates that you have to be out of the space by midnight and the elevator is slow, you would have to pay a penalty charge, because you won't be out in time. I might not take the space because of that.

Other negatives might be limits on what the client can do. For example, I did an event at a museum where we could only have white-colored drinks—no red wine, etc. That was a potential deal breaker, but the client did eventually go with the space because of location.

Other deal breakers or at least challenges for me are idiosyncrasies that make it difficult to design the event—not being able to chain things or adhere things to the structure, the walls or pillars, for instance.

Stergiou: I'm in a very specific niche, doing events for a cool and trendy company in the coolest, trendiest city in the world. The venues we choose not only have to be cool and trendy, but also pretty new to the market, so that New Yorkers or people in LA aren't tired of going there. You want people to say, "Oh, this is a great new venue."

One thing I also always do when looking at a potential event venue is to walk into the bathrooms and make sure they're acceptable and that there are enough of them. There's

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Also, be aware that things change, especially during an economic recession. Many places are much more open to negotiating now than they used to be, and some of them have even scaled back their operations. There may be a new person in charge who might be more willing to budge on price, so you might be able to work something out.

Other suggestions I recommend are trying barter deals for companies that need exposure or need to get people in the door. Another option is to use a new vendor and guarantee future business. A lot of smaller new companies are barely holding up in this new economic climate, so having future checks in the pipeline, even at a heavily discounted cost, really helps.

What factors do you consider when choosing a venue for a cocktail reception—the positives and the deal-breakers?

Mariella: Generally, for any type of function, cocktail reception or otherwise, the choice of venue has to do with the client's objective. The objective for one cocktail reception might be very different from the objective for another. But generally, location is very important, and so is pricing and ease of use. By ease of use, I mean how easy is it for me and my staff to get into the space? How much time do they allow us? Is it a place where there's very short timing, because they're open to the public during the day, and we can only get in an hour before our event? Is it 10 flights up, or on the ground floor? Is it someplace where we can drive our van up to it to get our stuff out? Is it a union place, not a union place? Is it a venue that's going to make our lives easier and allow us to make a really great event for our client? I think when venues are unwilling or unable to be flexible, it's a deal

nothing that can kill an event faster than a bathroom situation where 500 girls are waiting in line for three stalls.

I also call people who have held an event at the space recently to get their opinions. It's a very small world and people tend to know each other very well—a good reputation goes a long way. Likewise, the opposite: If the reps at a venue have a track record of agreeing to the details of an event and then letting the event fall apart onsite, word gets around.

What is the biggest mistake you ever made when planning a meeting or event? How did you handle the situation, and what did you learn from it?

Mariella: This is a good question, because this brings up something I did recently—I started planning a social event for a client and I didn't have a contract and I didn't get a deposit. I've done that in the past... Sometimes you're just trying to iron out the final details, and 99.9% of the time you go ahead with it and it's fine. You are trying to get things going and it's in the best interest of the client to get a head start. With this particular client, however, I had a feeling I shouldn't have done it and sure enough, the event got canceled. The person the event was for decided at the last minute not to go ahead with it. We had already printed out save the dates, and I did get reimbursed for those, but for all the consultant time I put into planning it, I did not get reimbursed at all. I will never work again on an event without a signed contract and deposit.

Placide: Years ago, I was planning a sales and marketing event at a museum. When we walked through the space, the

them from behind to create illuminated panels that would fall away to the background and visually merge with the color of the walls. Unfortunately, that solution created some nooks and crannies that blocked off some of the sales and marketing people from the rest of the attendees. We ended up moving some of the bars to improve the traffic flow and enable people to interact more easily.

What I learned was not to use a space where the actual structure is going to change before the event. In the case of a museum or art gallery, I might also ask to see the artwork that's going to be on the walls during an event so we'll know what we are exposing the attendees to.

Stergiou: Earlier in my career, we had a huge after-party for a film premiere at a semi-cool club in New York. I didn't nitpick over the contract as much as I should have. The contract stated that we had the venue privately for the event and that we could come two hours early to set up. When I showed up on the day of the event, there was a huge after-work party going on in the space, and there was no way we could set up for our event with 500 people already partying in the space.

Also, when we signed the contract to book the space, the venue had an upstairs and a downstairs. Subsequently, the venue decided to give the downstairs space a different name, so technically we were left with only the upstairs area for our party, since that was the only space that went by that name.

After I had a complete mini-nervous breakdown and lost it for about ten minutes, I spoke with the manager who was not the same manager I had signed the contract with originally. I got him to agree to book out the after-work party 15 minutes earlier. He had booked the two events literally back to back, minute to minute. I succeeded in convincing him that our party had a higher level of press coverage that would serve him better in the long run.

Then I called in some extra friends and asked some favors of people who had worked events for

us in the past and had all hands on deck, ready to go, so we could flip the room in those 15 minutes we had to do it.

The hardest part was having to train the bar staff on what the specialty drinks were, while people were coming in the door. The music was already on, people were wanting drinks, and we hadn't had that half-hour of prep time before the party to brief the bar staff.

Now, I always write in all of my contracts, that the entire venue—and I specify all floors regardless of any changes in the names of the space or different entrances to the space—must be entirely vacated not only for the event but also for the setup itself. ■

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rep assured us that in terms of the walls and configuration of the space, 70-80% would stay the same and 20-30% of the walls would move around with the next installation, which was going to go up about a month before our event.

We booked the space without knowing exactly what was going to be exhibited on those walls during our event and it turned out that the artwork was highly controversial, unlike the artwork we saw during our original walk-through. We felt that the new installation was embarrassing and insulting to women, religious groups, and political groups.

Our solution was to build pop-up or spandex panels that would hide the more objectionable artwork and then upright